

INDIA AND THE OPIUM TRADE

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IN view of the growing interest in the United States of America in the opium traffic, particularly with a view to its suppression for moral and humanitarian reasons, it will not be inopportune to explain the attitude of India, one of the four great opium-producing countries of the world, toward this question. Reformers, in their zeal to destroy what is commonly called the 'opium evil,' have often misrepresented, no doubt unconsciously, the policy of the Government of India. Its monopoly of the manufacture of opium; its strict control of the cultivation of the poppy, from which crude opium is prepared; its supervision of opium sales, both wholesale and retail, and whether sold for purposes of consumption in India or export to other countries, are frequently assailed in the press and from the platform, as so many manifestations of a sinister and immoral purpose to exploit and encourage a human weakness, for purposes of revenue. Critics whose outlook is tinged with political bias even see in these steps a subtle attempt of British Imperialism — for is not the Government of India controlled by Great Britain — to corrupt British dominion in the East by poisoning the people of the Orient with this most deleterious of drugs. Political motives and pecuniary greed, it is claimed, are the true mainsprings of this monopolistic policy.

These allegations, however, will not bear examination in the light of facts. To take first the question of opium consumption in India itself. Before the advent of British rule, there were two

classes of consumers in the country: those who used it as medicine, and those who took it as a narcotic. Its use as medicine was legitimate; its use as a drug in every way reprehensible. But there was no control over consumption of either kind, or production for either purpose. Those who wanted opium for medicinal purposes could grow it or buy it without let or hindrance. Those who used it as a narcotic were equally free. They could own it in any quantity, take it in any measure, use it in any form. They could swallow it solid as a pill, or smoke it as a paste in their pipes. They could dream under the magic spell of its fumes in the quiet of their homes, or in public places especially maintained for smoking opium. There was no prohibition against public dens, any more than there was against inhaling it in private. It was the golden age of the *Tiryagi*.

British legislation, while not interfering with the traditional use of opium as medicine, sought rigorously to put down its pernicious misuse. To maintain the public saloon was made a crime. To possess a preparation of opium for smoking, or instruments used for such a purpose, became a crime. To sell more than two fifths of an ounce of opium to a purchaser became a crime. For a private person to be found in possession of a larger quantity became a crime. To engage in trade without a license became a crime.

These opium laws were not a dead letter, but were rigidly enforced. The effectiveness with which they have been

applied may be gathered from this one fact. The writer of this article spent five years as a magistrate in two of the most cosmopolitan cities in Northern India, — centres of pilgrimage, to which people thronged from every part of that vast continent, — but never once had he to try a case arising out of a breach of these laws. Government control has eliminated the opium den; it has all but eliminated opium-smoking. It has blocked every avenue of abuse.

But the law, through its preventive machinery alone, could not have accomplished this. Had private cultivation and manufacture of opium been allowed, abuses would never have been completely suppressed. Control of cultivation and control of sale were conditions precedent to the effective carrying-out of the law. And if control had accomplished nothing but the suppression of opium dens and the cessation of opium-smoking, it would have been fully justified. Monopoly of production came to destroy an evil, and not to fulfill it.

But, it will be said, India consumes 900,000 pounds of opium every year; surely so much could not be required for purely medicinal purposes. If abuse in the form of smoking has ceased, it must exist in some other form. The reasoning may be logical, but the inference is false. The consumption per capita of opium in India works out at 26 grains, or 10 grains less than the corresponding figure for America, if the statistics given by the American publicist, Miss La Motte, are correct. In spite of an increase in population, this figure has remained stationary since the Royal Commission on Opium presented its report in the eighteen-nineties. The constancy of the figure can only prove two things: (1) that the consumption of opium in India is not on the increase, as some controversialists infer from the fact that opium revenue has increased;

and (2) that the demand for such consumption is limited to customary uses of the drug, which public opinion does not condemn and the law cannot touch.

The Occidental systems of medicine may consider even 26 grains per head of population to be too large a quantity for medical purposes; but it does not follow that Indian homœopathy takes the same view. Modern remedies, even where such have been discovered, are not cheaply or easily available everywhere in India. Tropical fevers and diseases of the stomach, such as dysentery, are instances in point. To the people of the land these are not new diseases, and as to most of these, original empiricism regards opium as both a preventive and a prophylactic. In old age people use it as a tonic.

All this may be rank superstition or heresy to the allopath; but in a country where modern medical facilities are inadequate to medical needs, it would be inhuman to deprive the people of a cheap and tried remedy. It would also be impolitic to force a privation which might be actively resisted as an interference with custom. Beliefs which have the sanction of centuries can change but slowly. Such changes also, as the overthrow of scientific dogma, can be achieved by education alone. The task of educating 320,000,000 people cannot be rushed, and the Government of India cannot justly be blamed for leaving to time what time alone can accomplish.

But as to the question of export to foreign countries. Government monopoly of this is historic. The Moguls, or rather the Emperors of Delhi, held it that their monopoly was ineffective, and the East India Company had ultimately to revive it, as, in the case of their servants, the opium trade became a crying scandal. The Crown continued the system which the Company had been compelled to adopt. Any other

course would have benefited no one but the smuggler. It would have made the observance either of the Shanghai Agreement or of the Hague Convention impossible. Given an effective demand for the commodity, given the usual incentive to human daring and cupidity which gain never fails to supply, it is much more difficult to control its distribution if production is not under control than if it is.

One reason why Persia has not ratified the Hague Convention is that, having no control over the production of opium, she feels powerless to control trade in the drug. Turkey is outside the Convention for this reason as much as for any other. If India has succeeded in keeping faith with the Convention,—and of the four countries which produce opium she alone has done so,—it is because her control of production makes it possible for her to bolt and bar the door on traffic which she does not sanction.

In 1909 she made an agreement with China that, *pari passu*, with arrangements made by the latter to suppress the production of opium within its territories, the export of Indian opium to China would be reduced. That agreement was honorably kept, and since 1917 no opium has been exported to China from India. This arrangement cost India four million sterling a year. And although there has been a recrudescence of opium cultivation in China on an enormous scale, India has shown no disposition to reopen the question of exporting opium to China. On the contrary, she has tried to assist the Chinese Government in closing all avenues of illicit trade by strictly regulating the manner of sale of opium, and the quantity sold in India for export to territories adjacent to China.

After the agreement with China, the amount of opium to be exported to regions other than China and the Far

East was fixed at 13,200 pounds per annum, 800 pounds less than the figure arrived at by taking an average of such exports over the period of years immediately preceding the date of the agreement, when China was importing all her requirements and no inducement to smuggling existed. This was merely to leave no margin for illicit trade. And to control further the possibilities of such traffic, arrangements have been made with the Governments of British North Borneo, Hongkong, and Singapore, by which Indian opium is sold direct to the administrations.

India is endeavoring to make similar arrangements with all other Governments whose nationals use Indian opium. A more genuine proof of the earnestness of her desire to help to the fullest extent in eliminating abuses of opium it is not possible for any country to have given. India has discharged her obligations to the Hague Convention in the letter and in the spirit. It is a singular requital of her honesty and good faith that, of all the countries in the world, she alone is singled out for criticism which is as extravagant as it is unmerited and unjust.

One word about India's financial policy in its relation to the opium monopoly. *Excise duties on intoxicants* are a source of revenue in almost every civilized country. Excisable articles vary with the habits of each country, but not this fiscal principle. If this opium revenue were derived from human degradation, the sooner it should perish, the better: the treasures of El Dorado multiplied a millionfold were a base profit to make by so destructive a traffic. But such is not the case. The fundamental principle of Indian excise policy is to raise the maximum revenue from the minimum consumption. The obvious and natural effect has been to restrict consumption. During the last few years the price of opium has been

raised fifty per cent. This, and not increased consumption, as is sometimes alleged, is the real explanation of the increase in opium revenue.

If government monopoly of production were abolished, it would impoverish the public exchequer without benefiting a soul. An army of officials would have to be called into being, at immense and wholly unremunerative cost to their state, to prevent private production of, and illicit traffic in, opium. Countries that import Indian opium would not consume one ounce less of the drug than they do now. The supplies now obtained from India they would then get from Persia and Turkey, where production of the drug would gain fresh stimulus. Smuggling would grow apace along the Indian coast. In view of such a prospect it is only sound, practical statesmanship to continue that government monopoly through which effective control can alone be exercised.

What next? The world must move forward; the abuse of opium is a dangerous evil and must be drastically dealt with. The first step in the direction of effectively suppressing it is the co-operation of all the opium-producing countries in a common endeavor to that end. The League of Nations, which, under the Treaty of Versailles, stands charged with this duty, has already taken the necessary initiative. Powers which have not yet ratified the Hague Convention (of which Persia and Turkey are the most important) must be asked to do so now. Until these two powers

have adhered to the Convention the campaign against abuse cannot be carried to a successful conclusion.

Once this is accomplished, it will be high time to devise means to curtail such uses of opium as old-time custom considers to be legitimate, but scientific opinion regards as superfluous. The decisive factor in this branch of reform will be the awakened conscience of the people concerned. International opinion may expedite the awakening; international action will be both impracticable and unwise. In such a programme of reform, a programme which recognizes the difference between the practical and the ideal, which leaves to international initiative what is rightfully its province, and to national action what is purely a matter of domestic concern, India will wholeheartedly coöperate; and if others play their part as she has played her part toward the Hague Convention, the opium evil will finally disappear.

But let us end with a note of caution. However worthy the cause of reform, let not our zeal for it obscure or disturb the truth; for zeal which is not tempered with tolerance is a dangerous ally. And let us not attempt too much, lest we accomplish too little. The complete suppression of the abuse of opium must be the immediate goal; its restriction to what modern scientific opinion regards as permissible should be the ultimate ideal. Some other policy may promise the semblance of success; in substance, it will fail.